

Chapter 1

Highlights of Eritrean History

*Ethiopia shall soon stretch out
her hands unto God*

Psalm 68:31

Eritrea, as a geographical and political entity, is a scant eighty years old, yet the history of the tribesmen who populated the northern highlands antedates the erection of Stonehenge in England. Owing to the geographical location astride pilgrimage and trade routes, Eritrean history is suffused with foreign influences ranging from Syrian Christianity to the culture of Arabian immigrants. Even the name is foreign and is probably a derivative of the ancient Greek cartographical designation, *Mare Erythraean* (Red Sea). But foreign influence played a somewhat less beneficent role in Abyssinian development. Historically, Eritrea was victimized by an endless succession of invaders serving various causes. Pillage and barbarity were commonplace. Moreover, social upheaval was the *leit motif* of Eritrean life for 3,000 years—a chronicle of invasion, religious contention, internecine war and repeated instances of cultural assimilation. It was a society that pivoted on military balances where only the strongest survived to dictate policy.

Present day Eritrea comprises an area roughly equivalent to the state of New York. It is a land of fascinating topographical extremes. Mountainous highlands bisect the area with elevations up to 8,000 feet, broad *ambas* of rocky grassland and a pleasantly temperate climate. To the west, the sparsely vegetated lowlands marry the Sudanese deserts, and on the east, the coastal plains merge with the Great Rift Valley in the Danakil Depression, reputed to be the hottest place on earth. The geography, particularly the precipitous escarpments, has also been a contributing factor in Eritrean history. The ascents from the peripheral lowlands have historically provided a formidable barrier. For much of its 3,000 year history, the security of the highlands allowed the Abyssinian culture to metamorphose with minimal foreign infringement. Even though Europe had been aware of Abyssinia's existence since before the birth of Christ, the first Europeans didn't arrive until well into the Middle Ages.

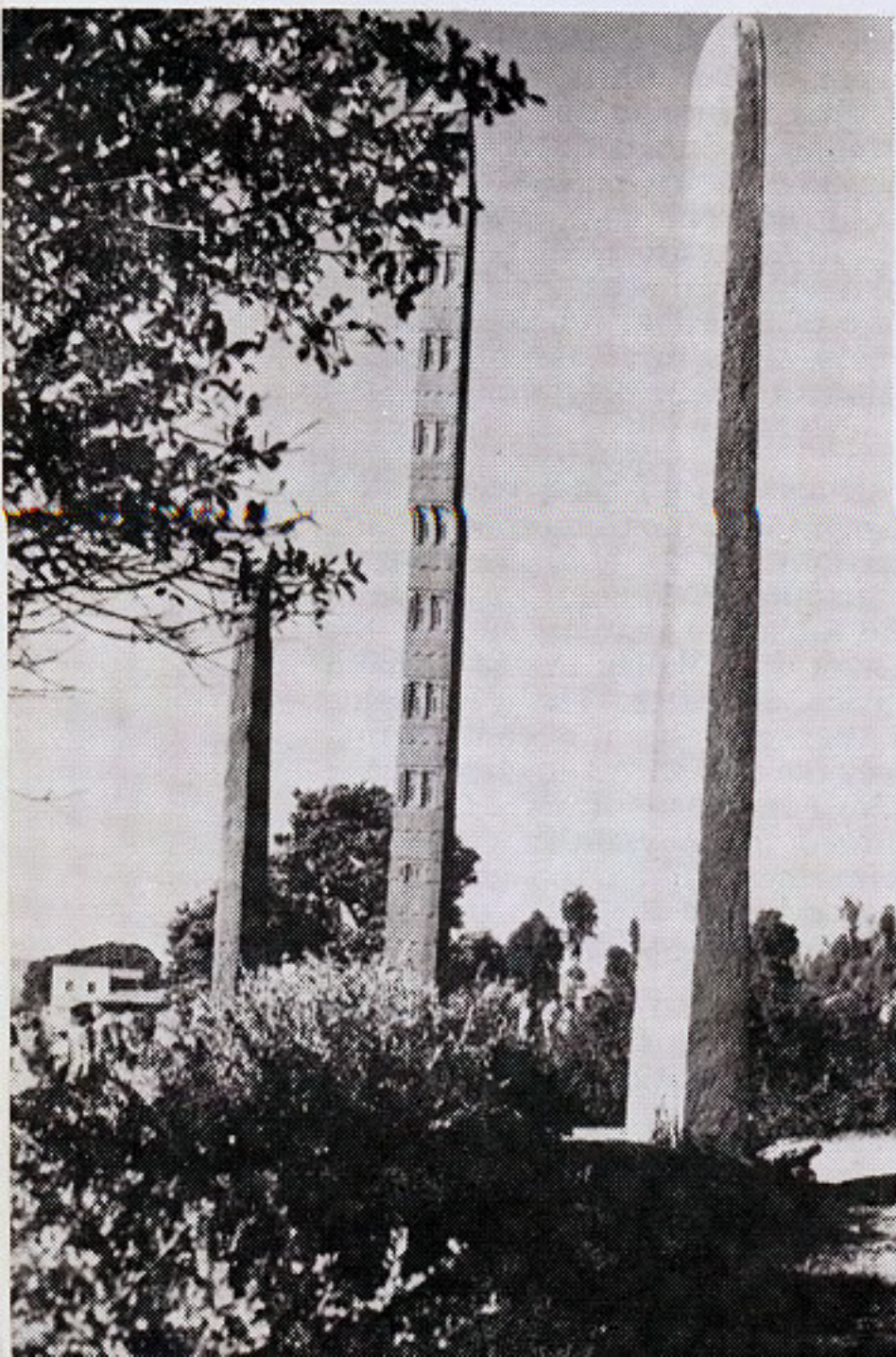
The question of the exact origins of the Eritrean people is still an academic one although it is likely that early migrations into the Eritrean highlands originated from the Kingdom of Cush. Cushitic kings dominated

portions of present day Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda about 700 B.C. The Cushitic people who migrated into Eritrea during the first millennium B.C. were primitive animists. At roughly the same time, the Semitic tribes of southwestern Arabia had gained preeminence in the Near East, mostly as a result of their successes in irrigated agriculture. When the Semites sought to increase their demesne, the natural move was across the short expanse of the *Mare Erythraean* in to Eritrea.

The initial Semitic migrants found the arid coastal regions inhospitable and gradually moved into the highlands and a terrain and climate akin to their own. It was in the highlands that they first encountered the Cushitic tribes. After a few hundred years of cultural interface, the Cushites were either absorbed or driven south into the Danakil. The superior culture carried by the Arabian Semites not only quickly assimilated the Cushites, but provided the foundation on which the the Axumite Empire was built. The early Semitic settlements became important centers of trade by maintaining ties with Arabia and by taking advantage of the bustling Red Sea commerce.

The Axumite Kingdom gained prominence in the first century A.D. The exact dimensions of the empire are not known, but there is evidence that it reached north to the Nile Valley, east to Mecca and accounted for substantial territory in Africa. Owing to its place as a center of commerce for the Red Sea, the Axumite rulers were in contact with the Byzantine Empire and most eastern Mediterranean countries. Ezana, the greatest of the Axumite kings (4th century A.D.), is believed to have introduced Geez as the official language, but more importantly, he was instrumental in making Christianity the official religion of the kingdom.

During the reign of Ezana's father, two Syrians, Aedesius and Frumentious, were shipwrecked on the Red Sea coast. They were taken to Axum and eventually became tutors of young Ezana. Since both Syrians were



Although many stelae are found throughout Tigre and Eritrea, Axum's are the most imposing. They stand in prominent testimony of the Semitic culture transplanted in the Ethiopia highlands.

Photo: Mike Hoffman

Christian, Ezana was evidently schooled in Christian precepts. After Ezana became king, Frumentious and Aedesius left Axum. Aedesius returned to Syria and Frumentius travelled to Alexandria where he urged the Coptic Patriarch to send a bishop to preside over Axum's nascent Christianity. Frumentius himself was consecrated sometime around 340 A.D. and returned as the first Bishop of Axum. Upon his return, he succeeded in converting his erstwhile student and Christianity began to spread with royal endorsement. The conversion of the empire, however, was neither immediate nor all-encompassing. Adherents to Judaism (Semites were Judaic) and to paganism clung tenaciously to their beliefs and do to this day.

If regionalism and civil war were the most divisive factors in Ethiopian history, then it is Christianity that has been the unifying bond that has saved the country from piecemeal conquest. Its historical significance cannot be overstated. The solidarity of Christian Ethiopia has surmounted the debilitation of inter-tribal war and numerous incursions of hostile «infidels».



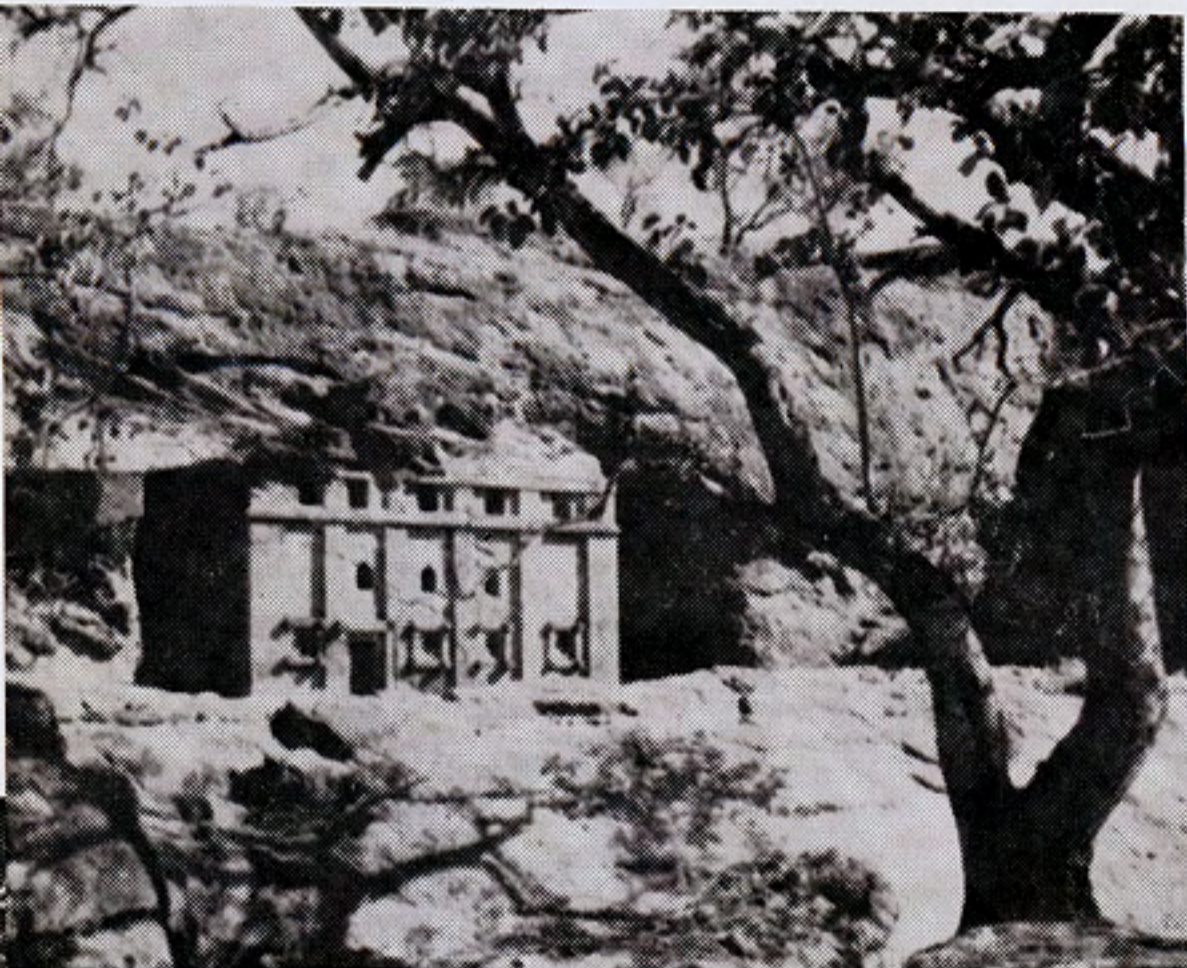
The Afars are direct descendents of the aboriginal Cushitic tribesmen who were driven into the lowlands by the Semities.

Photo: Nancy Rasmuson

In the early years of the 8th century, the loss of Axum's principal port to Muslim invaders sounded the death knell for the trade-oriented kingdom. Within a century, the Eritrean seacoast and the Dahlak Islands were in Arab hands, and a great portion of the lowland people (Cushitic) had become perforce adherents of Islam. At the close of the 10th century, a pagan tribe led by a woman called Judith invaded the northern highlands bent on the destruction of the last vestiges of Axumite political power and the obliteration of Christianity. Judith and her armies sacked churches and monasteries and butchered every available Christian. (To this day, women are not allowed to enter St. Mary's Church because of Judith's spoliation of Axum's old churches.) The upshot was the loss of all northern regions and a fragmented government which retreated to the south. From that point, the resultant ascendancy of Amhara authority in southern Ethiopia occurred without any interface with the Eritreans who held sway over the north. This separation certainly contributed to the acrimony which came to characterize Ethio-Eritrean relations. It also served as the foundation for the cultural barrier between the Amhara and Tigre tribes. Judith's massacres may have also contributed to the rise of the Muslim faith or

the Axumite peripheries, since there was something to be said for being a live Muslim rather than a dead Christian.

The Zagwe Dynasty (about 1148 to 1277 A.D.) was the next historically significant development for Christian Ethiopia. The Zagwe sprung from Cushitic origins and traced their lineage to Moses rather than to Solomon as the Axumite kings had done. Because of this, succeeding emperors have denounced them as usurpers. Most notable of the Zagwe kings was Lalibela who was the architect of the monolithic churches in the present day Wollo village which bears his name. With pilgrimage routes to the Holy Land interdicted by inimical Muslims, the 11 churches served as a new Jerusalem (replete with River Jordan) for Ethiopian pilgrims.



The churches at Lalibela were painstakingly sculpted from solid rock. Legend has it that the process took 5,000 workers 25 years.

Photo: Mike Hoffman

With the end of the Zagwe Dynasty, the Solomonic line was restored and the political center of the state became the Shoa (Amhara) region. This particular time in Ethiopian development was highlighted by two events: the climax of the struggle with the ever-encroaching Muslims and the first relations with Europe.

The new emperor was faced with the threat of Muslim encirclement and European powers were equally uneasy over the threat to southern Europe posed by the militaristic Muslims. They were also aware, in a vague sort of way, of the presence of Ethiopia on the Horn of Africa as a potential Christian ally. Homer (prior to 700 B.C.) and Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.) refer to Ethiopia in their writings. Marco Polo (1254-1324) reported on a visit to Adulis on his return from the Far East, and in general, Christian Europe was intrigued by the Christian Red Sea realm they believed (or hoped) was ruled by the legendary Prester John. Ethiopian delegates at the Council of Florence in 1441 galvanized European interest and set the stage for a Portuguese-Ethiopian alliance a century later. Since the Portuguese were the first to sail a fleet into the Indian Ocean, they became the first Europeans to ally themselves with Ethiopia in the continuing battle with the Muslims.

In 1516, the Turks conquered Egypt and gained control of the ports on the Red Sea, and a settlement on the Dahlak Islands flourished as a major slave trading center. In 1531, Ahmed Gran led a Muslim army of

Somalis and Danakils in a bold attack aimed at extirpating Christianity in the highlands. He overwhelmed Shoan forces and pushed northward toward Tigre and Eritrea. In his wake he left gutted churches and Moslemized Christians. Eleventh-hour salvation came from Portugal who answered a long standing request for assistance by landing 400 troops in Massawa. This Portuguese expeditionary force and the combined Tigre-Shoan armies succeeded in defeating Gran. In the last major battle near Lake Tana, Ahmed Gran was killed along with half of the Portuguese soldiers. The remaining Portuguese stayed on and were assimilated into the population. After that victory, the Muslim threat ebbed, although the Turks again siezed Massawa around 1560 and held fast for 300 years.

The primary motive for Portuguese intervention in Eritrea was the desire to convert the citizenry to Catholicism. At the outset, the Portuguese missionaries enjoyed some success, but eventual rivalries between the members of the Catholic Church and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church became so bloody that all missionaries were expelled. This tumultuous period of civil and religious strife contributed to a pervasive antipathy to foreign Christians, and to xenophobia in general, that continued well into the 19th century.

Changes in political climate in Ethiopia in the early 17th century came to have a significant impact on Eritrea. Emperor Basilides moved the permanent capital to Gondar, thereby moving Ethiopian authority closer to Eritrea than it had been since Axumite times. The precedent was set of rewarding Eritreans for loyalty to the throne and vigilance against the Turks with parcels of land which resulted in a new class of landowner. This echelon served as a catalyst for Amhara influence in Eritrea.

In 1853, an Egyptian army attacked and occupied Keren. Ethiopian alarm was shared to a great extent by European powers who were wary of Egypt's designs on what had become a strategically important area. The Turks had previously leased the Massawa coastline to Egypt and



About the same time that slaves first arrived at Jamestown, Emperor Basilides busied himself with castle construction at Ethiopia's first permanent capital—Gondar.

Photo: Mike Hoffman

throughout the Red Sea area, Egyptian presence became increasingly apparent. Ethiopian and Egyptian settlements traded hostilities regularly. European activity, in general, in the coastal regions also increased. Following the French, the British Consulate in Massawa opened in 1849, and Italian missionaries settled in Keren.

In 1875, Egypt attacked Ethiopia from three sides. Although Egyptian forces succeeded in occupying Harrar (where they remained for 10 years), Emperor Yohannes' armies defeated them near Adi Quala. A second Egyptian army, led by an American officer, landed at Massawa in December, 1875 and marched to Gura only to be routed again. After the Battle of Gura, the Egyptians attempted no further inland expansion and confined themselves to the coastal regions. Rather than pressing the war into the peripheral lowlands, Yohannes concerned himself with affairs in the highlands, but the interbellum tranquility was short-lived.

In May, 1881, Sudanese Mahdists declared a holy war on all foreigners and overthrew the Egyptian government. By 1884, Chinese Gordon was besieged (and later murdered) in Khartoum, and Egyptian fortresses along the Sudanese coast were under attack. The British, acting in a protectoral role, solicited Yohannes' aid in evacuating the beleaguered garrisons in the Sudanese hinterland. Yohannes complied and succeeded in evacuating forces from Kassala and Gallabat. These towns were later re-captured by Sudanese Dervishes who then posed a very real threat to the Eritrean lowlands and burned Gondar in 1887. In the face of the threat, many of the lowland tribes sought the protection of the Italians who had lately arrived in Massawa.

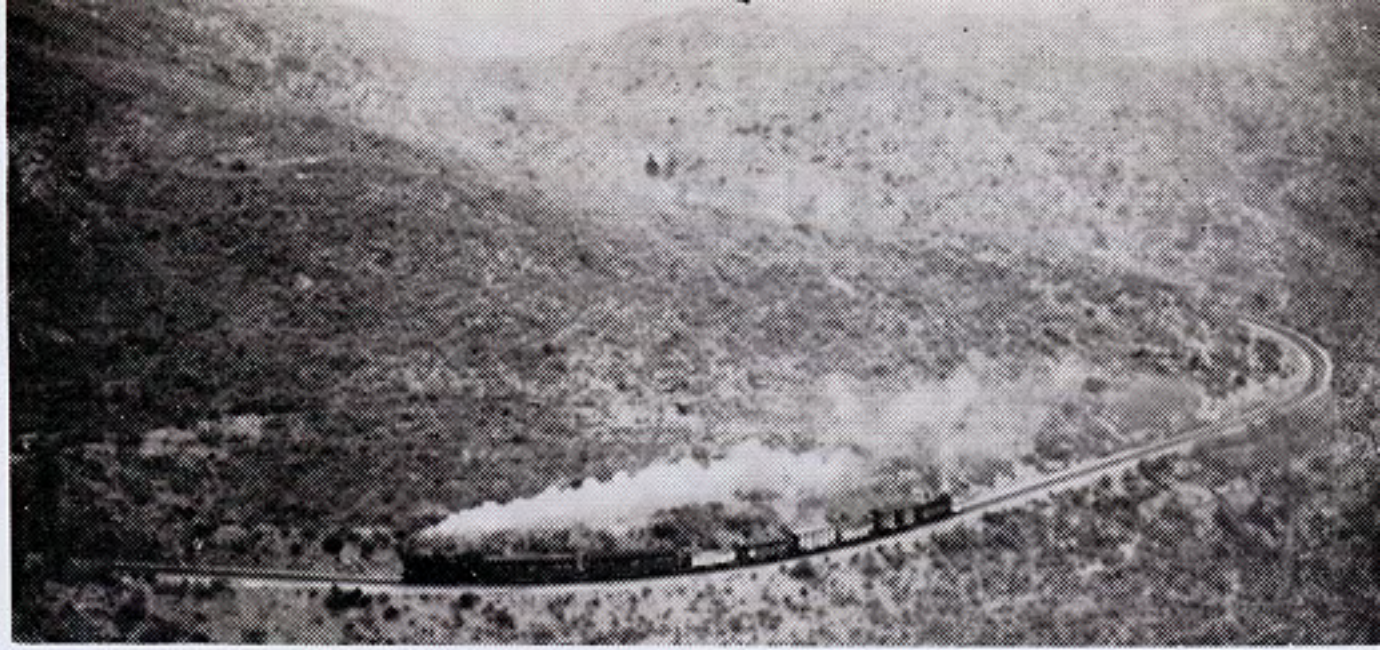
Italy was on the coattails of the colonialist scramble for Africa in 1882. The completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 had given the Red Sea littoral a strategic importance upon which France and England had already capitalized in Djibouti, and Aden and Egypt, respectively. The Italian missionaries who had been in Eritrea since the 1850's assumed a political role by urging the Italian Government to take advantage of Eritrea's colonial potential. The Italian Government took over Assab from an Italian shipping company which had purchased it from an Egyptian sultan in 1869. The main interest was not the port, but rather, the Ethiopian interior. The hazards to travel posed by the hostile Danakil tribes prompted the deployment of Italian troops in 1885.

The aftermath of the Mahdist uprising found Italy in an active diplomatic campaign to acquire some of the former Egyptian coastal holdings. The British encouraged the Italians and in fact, turned over control of the port of Massawa. On February 5, 1885, an Italian squadron arrived in Massawa, and by November, the Italians were in complete command and actively recruiting Eritreans to serve in their army. The majority of the lowlanders was only too anxious to enlist. The primary incentive was protection from the marauding Dervishes. Within a short period of time, Italian forces moved inland and occupied the lowland village of Saati.

Emperor Yohannes was truculent over British diplomatic policy and the subsequent Italian encroachment. He dispatched an army under Ras Alula, architect of the victories at Adi Quala and Gura, to stall the expansion. The army laid siege to the Italian garrison at Saati and then massacred a relief battalion marching across the flats. The Italians raised a diplomatic hue and cry, but in the end, retreated to Massawa.

In 1888, the reinforced Italians reoccupied Saati, constructed a railroad to ferry supplies from Massawa and fortified the town. Yohannes responded with 80,000 troops and a demand for immediate withdrawal. The Italians, however, held firm and issued counterdemands which included Ailet, Ghinda and control of the lowlands. The two armies remained poised on the brink of battle for several weeks until Yohannes was obliged once again to withdraw to deal with the Dervishes. Being a devout Christian, Yohannes felt the Muslim infidels were a much greater

The railroad reached
Asmara by 1920.
Photo: Mike Hoffman



threat to his empire than were the Italians. His retreat only encouraged the Italians, who interpreted the withdrawal as a sign of weakness.

Yohannes died from battle wounds shortly thereafter and Menelik II acceded the throne. After Yohannes' death, Ras Alula withdrew his armies into Tigre, and the Italians took advantage of the Lame Duck government by moving further inland. By June, 1889, they held Keren, and by August, they had occupied Asmara and deployed troops along the banks of the Mareb River. Faced with *de facto* Italian domination of Eritrea, Menelik signed the Treaty of Ucciale in May, 1889. The Treaty recognized boundaries of Italian Eritrea, but more importantly, it had a controversial provision regarding Italy's future relationship with Menelik's Ethiopia. The controversy centered on a stipulation in the Italian version of the treaty which required Menelik to use Italy as his agent for all dealings with other countries. This Italian version, which Menelik never signed, made Ethiopia a *de facto* protectorate. The Amharic version, however, provided that the Emperor merely had the option of using the Italian Government in that capacity. Disagreement over this clause led to an eventual denunciation of the entire treaty by Menelik and to rapid deterioration of relations between the two nations. Implicit in these machinations was the Italian aim of increasing holdings in East Africa without resorting to force, but once Menelik short-circuited their plans, the only alternative was outright aggression. The famous Battle of Adowa was the upshot.

Menelik's reign was the foundation of modern Ethiopia. By appeasing the Italians on his northern borders, he won time to extend his authority into the incorrigible pagan and Muslim areas of the south. The establishment of Addis Ababa as the permanent capital in 1893 demonstrated Menelik's interest in the southern regions. For the first time, the disruptive power of the feudal chiefs was virtually eliminated, so when the Italians attacked, they met a united Ethiopia head-on.

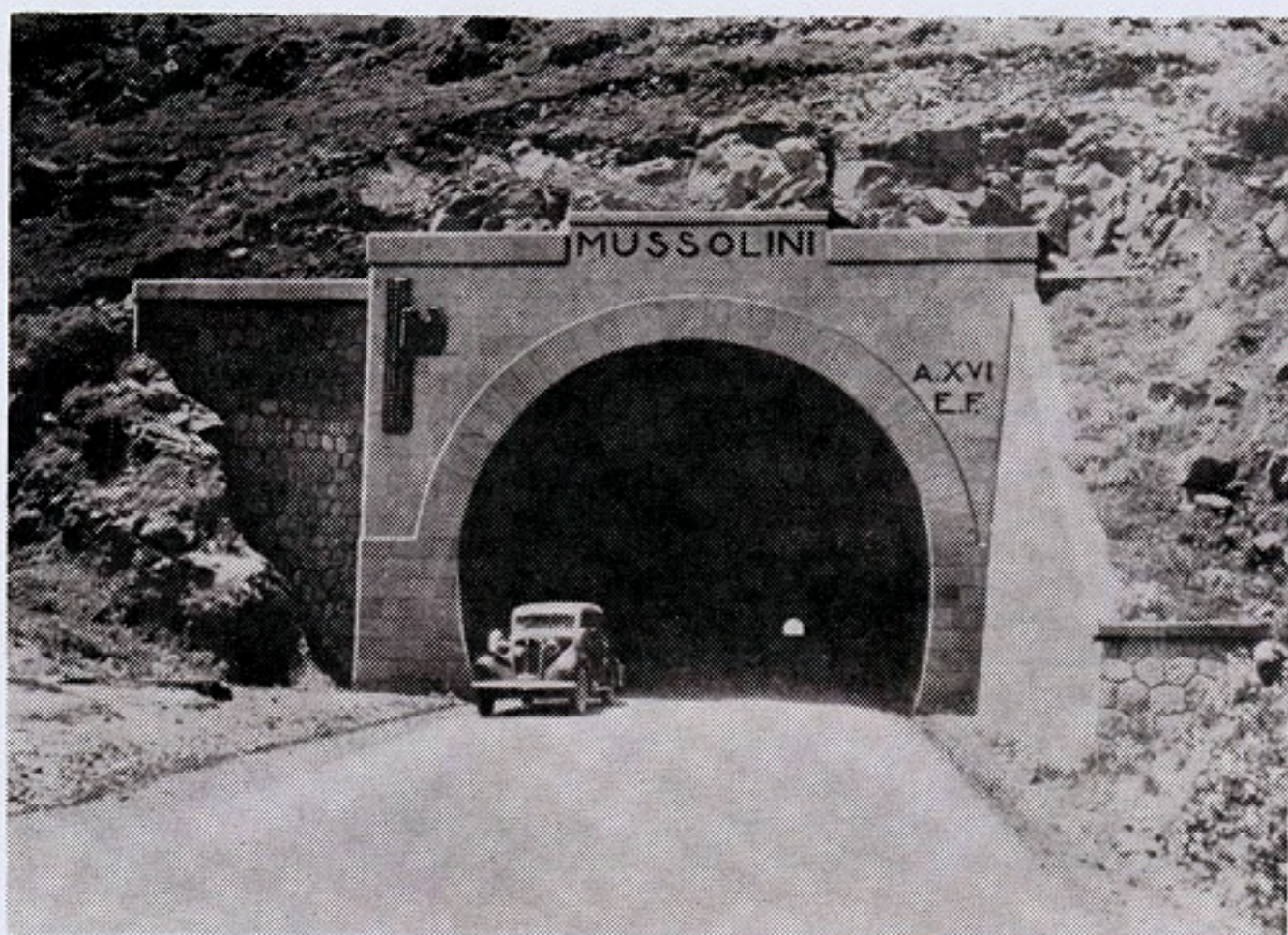
On January 1, 1890, Umberto I, King of Italy, proclaimed the Colony of Eritrea, and his army secretly began plans for the invasion of Ethiopia. The invasion plans were implemented in November, 1895. After losing a few skirmishes near Makalle, the Italians attacked Adowa. In the only battle in which an African power has defeated a European one, Menelik's armies outfought the Italians in the three-day battle and drove them back across the Mareb river. It was a great victory for Menelik and a humiliating defeat for Italy, who lost 12,000 soldiers as well as international prestige. It was the humiliation of Adowa that Mussolini was determined to avenge when the Fascist armies invaded again in 1939.

After the setback at Adowa, Italy temporarily set aside her ambitions and concentrated energies on organizing the colony. Italy's colonial motives and goals were more or less the same as those of other countries—to tap the abundant natural resources for Italian industry, to establish a clearinghouse for Italian exports and to offer a potential home for expatriate Italian citizens. Moreover, Eritrea was to become the staging area for further territorial acquisitions. Invasion plans for Ethiopia, volume two, were finalized in 1934.

The early years of colonial rule in Eritrea were benign, and Eritrea

outpaced Ethiopia in material progress. The Italian administration won popular acceptance by establishing security in previously dangerous areas, administering equitable justice, raising the standard of living and developing any number of public services in the cities, particularly in Asmara and Massawa. The civil governor ruled from Massawa until 1900 when he moved to Asmara.

In a word, the pre-Fascist years in Ethiopia were relaxed. Eritrea moved gradually toward the 20th century with agricultural reform, road and transportation systems, medical services and communication systems. When the Fascists took the reins of government in Italy, however, the picture changed dramatically. The Fascist administration in Eritrea imposed strict racial segregation and gave urgent priority to military preparations throughout the colony. The railroad linking Massawa, Asmara, Keren and Agordat had been completed in 1920, so road construction became the primary focus of the military preparations. General de Bono, who was to lead the planned invasion, landed at Massawa January 16, 1935 with 50,000 Italian workers who were to sustain the supply lines. The Italian army was expanded and Eritrean recruitment increased threefold. Massawa blossomed into a modern seaport and the Gura Airport was enlarged and re-equipped. The railroad's major function was military transportation and an aerial tramway was constructed to expedite movement of matériel.



«None of these 'spontaneous' cheers for il Duce had been painted out or defaced by the British... nothing, I thought, so showed British contempt for Mussolini and all he might yet attempt as those uneffaced self-testimonials.»

Commander Edward Ellsberg
Photo: Robert Hicks

The arduous journey from Massawa's docks to Asmara's depots atop the escarpment was a difficult and time-consuming one on the narrow-gauge railroad. The aerial ropeway offered a viable alternative for moving supplies quickly from the port. The ropeway was completed in 1936 and was the longest of its kind in the world. It reached 44½ miles across the terrid lowlands and scaled the escarpment stretched between towers up

to 3,000 feet apart. Eight diesel power stations maintained continuous movement for the 1500 3'x5' cargo trams which delivered 30,000 tons of cargo to Asmara each day. The ropeway was in operation for only five years. The British liberators took the diesel engines with them as they left to fight Rommel in North Africa.

Italy's ambitions had been emboldened by the conciliatory posture of the British, and after fabricating a border incident at Wal Wal, 400,000 armor-supported Italian troops crossed the Mareb River into the Ethiopian frontier October 3, 1935. H.I.M. Haile Selassie's 35,000 troops, armed mostly with spears and swords, were crushed in almost every confrontation, but if the outcome of the battle were ever in question, mustard gas quickly tipped the balance. By April, the invading Italians had reached Lake Tana and Harrar, and the Emperor escaped into exile through Djibouti. Addis Ababa fell in May, and Italy announced the sovereignty of Italian East Africa (comprised of Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia) shortly thereafter.

Fulminating again from his balcony over the Piazza Venezia, Mussolini vowed a humiliating defeat for the British in the Middle East as a partial restoration of the glories of the Roman Empire. Italy declared war on Great Britain and France June 10, 1940. The same day, the Italian army poured into France. In Africa, Italy attacked Sudan and Egypt. Fearing the vulnerability of extended supply lines, the Italian armies remained in the border regions of Kassala and Gallabat, thereby giving the British ample time to marshall their meager forces. In the face of stiffening British resistance, the Italian army retreated to a more defensible position. After being defeated at Agordat in February, they retreated to Keren where they were again overwhelmed in a spectacular two-month battle. After a few more skirmishes, the Italians surrendered Asmara and Mas-sawa, barely ten months after declaring war on Britain.

The more-or-less instant takeover by the British found them ill-equipped to cope with the problems of administering their newly-won territory. The miniscule administrative staff faced a number of exigent problems. The 50,000 Italian residents were generally intractable and fully expected immediate liberation from British dominance. General economic upheaval became widespread as local Italian industry ground to a halt. The British administration embarked on a moderate course of action to win popular support. They fortified this position with relief funds and philanthropic enterprise. The success of this transition period is owing in part to the fact that many of the Italian officials remained at their jobs and supported the British.

Any grandiose plans the British may have had for Eritrea were frustrated by provisions of the Hague Convention which forbade occupying powers during wartime to change laws and institutions within any occupied country. The British, however, did manage to abrogate segregation by simply not enforcing the Fascist laws, and at the same time, instituted a variety of programs to bolster the morale and vivify the economy. They gradually integrated Eritreans into the civil service infrastructure and focused attention on the inadequate educational facilities. They established the first teacher training institute and converted wartime buildings into schools and hospitals.

The end of Italian dominance spelled the virtual collapse of the Eritrean economy. Since all exports went to Italy, Eritrea had become wholly dependent on the Italian economy. All Eritrean industry had been managed by Italians and equipped with Italian machinery. Since the small-scale industries and the vast military preparations in Eritrea had relied on an Eritrean labor force, Italian defeat meant widespread unemployment. To assuage the unemployment problem, the British repatriated many of the Italians and shipped POW's to Kenya, South Africa and India. American intervention into the war in 1941, and intervention into Eritrea shortly thereafter, bolstered the economy for a while, but with the Allied victory in the Middle East, it slumped once again. The British



After the surrender of all Italian forces in Eritrea, the prisoners of war were interned in camps or «labor pools». Some of them became employees at the U.S. Naval Repair Base, Massawa, some were transported to labor camps in South Africa and others worked on the various American construction projects in Eritrea.

Photo: Robert Hicks

Administration encouraged new Eritrean-owned industry and agricultural development to absorb the labor force, but the next few years were trying ones, and the economy vacillated.

At the end of the war, the Allies began ridding themselves of former Axis-occupied territories. Eritrea posed a formidable problem because of the cogent claims made by Ethiopia and Italy. After many months of quibbling and two ineffectual fact-finding commissions in Eritrea, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted on December 2, 1950 that Eritrea should become federated with Ethiopia. The decision was influenced by the majority of Eritrean Christians who favored federation, as well as by the geographical and ethnic affinity of the two countries. The relationship between Eritrea and Ethiopia was to be similar to the relationship between state and federal governments of the United States. Eritrea was to have internal self-government while under the sovereignty of the Emperor. September 15, 1952 was set for the beginning of the federation, a date which allowed time for a government to be established and a constitution promulgated. A Bolivian diplomat was given the responsibility of drafting a constitution with the assistance of the British in-country administration.

The period just prior to federation was perhaps the most difficult for the British Administration. Problems arising from land claims and religious controversy were exacerbated by unemployment and aroused political feelings. The upshot was an acute *shifita* problem which subsumed simple banditry as well as armed confrontations between the

Christian and Muslim factions of the society. The offer of a general amnesty in June, 1951 served to ameliorate the problem and put an end to the fighting. Once tranquility was restored to the countryside, the transfer of authority to the fledgling Eritrean government became the final objective of the British caretakers. The United Nations resolution took effect September 11, 1952.

The federation was unsuccessful, mostly because of Ethiopia's resentment of Eritrea's semi-autonomous status. Ethiopia feared Eritrea might serve as an undesirable encouragement for separatist sentiments in other areas. The Eritrean Parliament succumbed to political pressure and dissolved itself in November, 1962, and Eritrea became the Empire's fourteenth province.



Historically, shifta chicanery has often taken on political overtones, but the brigands who happened on these two Asmara gentlemen were interested in more substantial returns. The shifta took everything they could carry or wear. The remaining set of clothing was rejected disdainfully as being ragged and unserviceable.

Photo: Charles Krumbein